

St Neots Club Site Paxton

Pits walk

Camping and Caravanning



Route Summary

A linear walk along the banks of the Great Ouse River, over ancient grazing meadows, leading to a beautiful reclaimed gravel extraction site which has been transformed into a wildlife haven. Along the way there is the opportunity to take small detours to see some of the pleasures of St Neots.

Route Overview



Category: Walking
Rating: Unrated
Surface: Moderate
Date Published: 21st September 2018
Difficulty: Easy
Length: 5.600 km / 3.50 mi
Last Modified: 21st September 2018

Description

The first section of the walk along the riverside allows you to experience the tranquillity and bountiful wildlife that the area has to offer.

As well as the natural history of the riverside there is also a diverse and lengthy human history to the area dating back to Neolithic times when man first started to populate the valley. Although Roman roads went through this area there is no evidence of large settlements appearing until Anglo-Saxon times. These would have been in three separate settlements at Eynesbury, Eaton Socon and Eaton Ford. It was not until 974 that the Priory was founded at St Neots. During early Norman times the Priory was transferred to the supervision of the Abbey of Bec in Normandy and rebuilt closer to the river. Unfortunately, the remains of this building are very incomplete, despite it having been an extensive and thriving community.

The town that was to develop into St Neots grew up around the Priory and its marketplace, which is still in the same location today. The whole area began to prosper due to the Priory, the Great North Road and the Great Ouse River. Unfortunately, there are very few remains of the Priory, but the route will take you through the area in which it stood for many hundreds of years.

The parish Church of St Mary The Virgin, although originally built at the end of the 12th Century, was extensively rebuilt during the 15th Century. The tower, which stands at 130 feet tall, is visible for miles around, partly due to the flat landscape of the area. There are a number of other denominational places of worship throughout the town, such as The Meeting House on the High Street built in 1718. Following a visit by John Wesley, a Methodist Chapel was built in 1794 on the corner of Huntingdon Street.

Leaving the Town Centre, the route passes across Lammas Meadow and Island Common. These tracts of land are remnants of the original common land used around the town and are maintained in a traditional manner. Grazing is only allowed after Lammas Day, 1 August. The area contains rare wildflowers such as Marsh Orchids, Marsh Woundwort, Water Violets and Tubular Water Dropwort.

Crossing the river from the parish of St Neots into Little Paxton some imagination may be necessary as mills of one description or another have stood in this area since before the Domesday Book. The most important is the Paper Mill, where in 1808 the Fourdrinier brothers developed a process by which the paper could be made in a continuous roll. The mill remained in production until flooding in 1988.

After walking around the edge of the village, nearly all developed since the end of WWII, you will arrive at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. The pits were originally dug out to remove gravel, and during this time bones of mammoths were recovered. Following much hard work and commitment, the barren excavation area is now a peaceful haven for wildlife. The 78-hectare site has a wide diversity of habitats that have encouraged a wide variety of insects and birds inhabiting the area all year round. Each habitat has its own distinct species, but two main attractions are the Nightingale and Kingfisher. Alongside the many birds, the insects to look out for are butterflies, moths, dragonflies, crickets and grasshoppers. Mammals also call this place home, and if you're lucky you could see stoats, weasels, otter, badger, harvest mouse, water shrew, voles and bats. Paxton Pits is a wonderful location demonstrating what can be achieved after the industrialisation of an area has finished.

Waypoints

1 Start at Camping and Caravanning Club site Reception

(52.22007; -0.27460)



Leave St Neots Camping and Caravanning Club Site via the riverside walk, then use the footbridge adjacent to the children's play area. Walk along the riverbank and under the road bridge before taking the steps onto the bridge. Again, cross the river into St Neots itself, turning left at the side of Bridge House Inn.

Alternatively, a short detour will take you to the historic market place and High Street, where many of the buildings date back to the 15th Century but have been refurbished and plaster facades added since.

2 Towards The Priory

(52.22766; -0.27172)



As you wander through the modern roads and pathways consider that this was the site of the Priory that gave its name to the town and without which the area would not have been as prosperous. You'll eventually arrive at the side of Lammas Meadow where you can head for the riverbank again near the marina. Enjoy the peace and quiet by the river contemplating that nothing has changed in this location for several hundred years.

3 Traffic lights at Mill Lane crossing

(52.24007; -0.26345)



On reaching Mill Lane, at a set of traffic lights cross the road and use the cycle and footway to cross the river. Turn

right along the river just after the lock gate and continue until the path forks at the side of Hayling Lake where a large information board will be seen. Take the left-hand fork, enjoying views over the lake on your right. At the end of the lake a path will be found signed Meadow Trail – follow this through to Paxton Pits Visitor Centre. The Centre opens at 10.00am daily, depending on the availability of its cheerful, knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers. Access to the nature reserve is free.

Paxton Pits Nature Reserve Visitor Centre

(52.25146; -0.25002)



After enjoying the many delights of Paxton Pits return to the Camping and Caravanning Club Site can be via the same route, or there are alternative footpaths going from the Nature Reserve to the riverbank. These can be used to extend your walk and pleasure.

